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Article

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## **‘Oiling the social wheels’ in an undergraduate chemistry lab: An ITA’s participation in small talk**

### **Abstract**

Even though small talk has been investigated in a variety of business contexts and service encounters, it is understudied in instructional settings. This paper explores the occurrence of small talk in a university chemistry lab between a Chinese international teaching assistant (ITA) and American students. Drawing on naturally occurring interaction data from a conversation analysis perspective, triangulated by interview data and researcher field notes, the study describes the particular functions of small talk, such as identity affiliation and rapport management through humorous small talk. The findings are discussed in relation to ITA identity and professional development and the role of small talk in instructional discourse.

**Key words:** small talk, rapport, ITAs, classroom discourse, identity, humour

## **1. Introduction**

International teaching assistants (ITAs) are degree-seeking graduate students teaching introductory undergraduate courses, as well as assisting and advising students in large North American research universities. ITAs are expected to deliver academic content effectively and communicate successfully with students in lectures/seminars, science labs, and office hours. In addition to delivering academic content, ITAs perform various discourse and pragmatic functions (Chiang 2011; Tyler 1992), such as sequencing activities, negotiating meaning, managing time and turn-taking, or moderating group or one-to-one discussions, thus engaging in interpersonal as well as academic talk.

Because the majority of the ITAs in the US use English as a second language (L2) in a new educational context, particularly with native English speaking American students, their communication skills in the classroom have received abundant scholarly attention (e.g., Bresnahan and Cai 2000; Chiang 2011; Shaw and Bailey 1990; Tyler 1992; Tyler and Davies 1990). While existing research on ITAs' communicative competence has long focused on their use of L2 English for instructional purposes, how they engage in non-instructional talk with students or build and manage rapport with them is not often taken into consideration. Interactions in an instructional setting involve more than just serving a transactional goal, such as delivering instructions, asking questions and eliciting responses from students, or completing particular classroom tasks. Rapport which Spencer-Oatey (2002, 2005) defines as the management of smooth and harmonious relations between individuals is an important component of classroom communication, particularly at the university level (Davies 1991; Twale, Shannon, and Moore 1997). More specifically, interlocutors in an instructional setting, specifically the ITA and students, engage in a process of forming relationships through different stretches of talk that is

not only limited to instruction. As will be shown in this paper, small talk can be an important tool in building rapport and managing relationships. Therefore, investigating how ITAs build relationships with undergraduate students using non-instructional small talk can enhance our understanding of the relational aspects of classroom communication and discourse. In what follows, I will first describe the interpersonal discourse characteristics of university classrooms with particular emphasis on science labs in order to situate the present study within a clear contextual frame. Next, I will operationalize the notion of small talk by drawing on conversation analysis as a theoretical and methodological framework and the relevant research in this area. Finally, I will present a conversation analysis of naturally occurring classroom small talk in a chemistry lab.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. ITAs' interpersonal communication in university classrooms**

Research on instructional communication in higher education settings has shown that interpersonal variables, such as communication style, solidarity, and humour, positively affect student learning (Frymier and Houser 2000). According to Graham, West and Schaller (1992), teaching is a relational process in which teachers and students develop a relationship using their interpersonal communication skills. In this vein, face-to-face communication in physical classroom settings enables both students and teachers to connect with each other, creating a sense of belonging to an academic community and express personal attitudes (Nesi 2012).

Possessing both the identity of a graduate student and the identity of a teaching assistant (TA), an ITA's position in university classrooms plays a significant role in establishing the classroom dynamics and relationships with students. According to Shaw and Bailey (1990), understanding and managing power relationships may be restricted by ITAs' home cultural

norms, specifically what types of behaviour patterns they perceive as acceptable in the classroom. Additionally, because ITAs and students share a student identity, patterns of behaviour may show variation in teaching contexts where there is a higher power differential between students and a teacher.

Research shows that American undergraduates strongly prefer an interactive, informal, personalized, and supportive atmosphere, especially in courses taught by teaching assistants (Axelson and Madden 1994; Plakans 1997). Among the factors that undergraduates attributed to the success of TAs, as Ranney (1993) noted, were balanced leadership and solidarity, which students felt American TAs exhibited at higher levels than ITAs. Similarly, on a scale of enthusiasm, rapport, approachability and fairness, ITAs were rated significantly lower than American TAs (Davis 1991; Twale et al. 1997). These findings indicate that, as much as the effectiveness in teaching content, social and interactional aspects of teaching bear importance in TAs' overall evaluation by students.

An important aspect of interpersonal communication in university classrooms is the use of humour and laughter, which constitute an important part of college classrooms (Tapper 1999; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999). Humour is an important indicator of conversational involvement as it helps establish and maintain rapport (Davies 2003). The social functions of humour involve managing relationships, claiming common ground, teasing, demonstrating in-group identity, and strengthening the solidarity of the group by reducing the distance between students and their instructors (Nesi 2012; Partington 2006; Tapper 1999). Bell (2002) contends that humour helps build or reinforce affiliation between interactants who share common knowledge and experiences and make relevant components of their identities visible during interaction. According to Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, humour, as a positive politeness

strategy, strengthens the positive face of the interlocutors and can work as a rapport building tool thanks to the shared background knowledge between the speaker and hearer.

Although humour has been studied in intercultural academic settings, particularly in British lectures by Nesi (2012) and Wang (2014) and engineering lectures from the UK, Malaysia, and New Zealand by Alsop (2016), how humour is used in instructional contexts other than lectures, such as science labs is yet to be explored. Additionally, the use of humour by ITAs is understudied (Kozlova 2008). Unger-Gallagher (1991) argues that ITAs may transition between their student and teacher identities during behaviour negotiation and attempts at humour when building rapport, especially by exchanging jokes.

## **2.2. The discourse of the science lab**

The science lab is a unique instructional environment in that it differs from the traditional lecture and seminar discourses in terms of its interactional structure. While lectures tend to be a practical way of delivering academic content to a large number of students, in seminar sessions students are usually in smaller groups and engage in more interactive activities, lead discussions and present their own opinions or solutions to problems (Nesi 2001). What both discourse types have in common, as Aguilar (2004) argues, is the didactic and expository structure and the presence of conceptual explanation and understanding. The discourse of science labs in general involves both planned speaking activities (e.g., to explain procedures and equipment set-up) and unplanned, spontaneous exchanges with undergraduates (e.g., question-answer interactions) (Gourlay 2008). In terms of interactivity, science labs resemble seminar sessions in that students take on more active and participatory roles during the session. In science labs TAs pay attention to individual students, particularly helping students with problems pertaining to experimental procedures (Axelson and Madden 1994). In addition to explaining experimental procedures, the

discourse of labs involves a variety of interactions, such as explaining and reinforcing safety regulations, carrying out administrative responsibilities, and managing time and people, therefore placing several linguistic and pedagogical demands on TAs (Myers 1994). Another difference between lectures and labs concerns academic and conversational listening, as discussed by Flowerdew (1994). While lectures involve mainly academic listening (on the part of students) and delivering information (on the part of teacher), labs involve conversational listening as they involve more interactive question-answer exchanges including but not limited to repetition, repair and negotiation of meaning.

Existing research on the language use by ITAs, particularly in chemistry labs, mainly focused on the question-answer exchanges, such as open-ended and closed questions, confirmation checks and reformulations (Tanner 1991; Williams, Inscoc and Tasker, 1997). However, the investigation of interactive communication in the lab setting is limited to transactional question forms and functions. How ITAs engage in non-transactional communication, particularly via small talk, needs to be explored to understand the relational aspects of classroom communication.

### **2.3. Small talk as ‘talk-in-interaction’**

Small talk is generally viewed as ‘trivial’ talk associated with everyday social events and uncontroversial topics, such as weather, health or sports (Coupland 2000, 2003; Schneider 2008). It dates back to Malinowski’s (1972) concept of phatic communion, a type of random and ‘aimless’ talk that helps establish social bonds between interlocutors. In light of Holmes’s (2000) conceptualization of small talk in the workplace as a continuum along which core business talk and phatic communion appear on each end, small talk can encompass a wide range of different



types of personally-oriented talk including but not limited to joking, appreciation, showing concern, empathy, and greetings.

All social talk consists of a transactional goal and an instrumental goal (Coupland 2000). The transactional goal, referring to the content of a message, can take various forms such as medical, educational, political, or commercial (Coupland 2000). The instrumental goal is the relational frame of talk that helps interlocutors establish relationships. Small talk may put the transactional goal of talk on hold and creates an opportunity to shift to the relational frame of talk (Holmes 2000; Van De Mierop 2016). According to Pullin (2010), transactional and instrumental frames are inherently linked, as the achievement of transactional goals is dependent on the establishment of interpersonal relationships. In other words, small talk can further the transactional goals of an interaction by directly or indirectly constructing and balancing the power relations between interlocutors.

While small talk has generally been defined as peripheral talk which does not play a central role in conversation and thus is deemed unimportant, many scholars recognized the importance of it in establishing social cohesiveness, negotiating interpersonal relationships, and minimizing threats to interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987; Coupland 2003; Laver 1975). From an interactional perspective, small talk can be considered as an example of conversation in which participants reveal their identities and show involvement and creativity. In line with Tracy and Naughton's (2000) views of talk and social interaction, identity-work which refers to the way talk makes certain individual and group identities salient can be revealed in instances of small talk. The identities that are revealed in small talk exchanges, as Laver (1975) suggests, reveal not only indexical meanings or group affiliations, but also social identities and stances that are contested and negotiated by the participants. In this vein, the investigation of small talk falls

into the remit of Conversation Analysis (CA) in that social reality is co-created by interactants through talk-in-interaction. As mentioned earlier, small talk is part of everyday and institutional talk, therefore, CA is a suitable theoretical and methodological framework for exploring and understanding the structural and functional underpinnings of everyday conversation as well as naturally occurring social interaction among lay persons and/or professionals (Sidnell & Stiver 2013).

Most existing research on small talk has been conducted in professional settings. Looking at small talk exchanges in a government office, Holmes (2000) found that small talk acts as a transitional tool to establish and maintain friendship and collegiality, as well as power in managing relationships with subordinates. Analysing the discourse of small talk in a Hong Kong firm, Mak and Chui (2013) demonstrated that small talk is used by in-group members to integrate new workers into the workplace. In addition to being a means of nurturing interpersonal relationships, small talk is also believed to help build solidarity and rapport between interlocutors (Pullin 2010). A few studies conducted in medical settings used CA as a method in analysing small talk. Hudak and Maynard (2011) found that topicalised small talk between orthopaedic surgeons and their patients was referentially independent from their institutional identities and involved more personal and neutral topics. Analysing the nurse-patient interactions in a Scottish hospital, Benwell and McCreaddie (2016) found that the switches between social and medical talk were frequent, but at times these switches could intervene with the institutional goals of the interactions.

In educational contexts, non-institutional small talk, according to Biggs and Edwards (1994), helps develop mutual trust between students and teachers in a friendly safe environment, thus establishing solidarity between instructors and students. Exploring small talk in an ESL

classroom in Hong Kong, Luk (2004) demonstrates how classroom small talk establishes a symmetry in role relationships between teachers and students and contributes to the development of cross-cultural communication of learners. In digital environments, small talk has also been found to mediate professional and personal identities of student teachers of Spanish and English in an online telecollaborative Skype video exchange to achieve their institutional goals (Dooly and Tudini 2016) and build rapport and foster collaboration among postgraduate intercultural class students in a computer-mediated group assignment (Maíz-Arévalo 2017). As can be seen, the investigation of small talk has been limited in instructional contexts and mainly non-existent in face-to-face university classrooms.

### **3. The study**

This paper presents an exploratory case study of a Chinese ITA and her small talk interactions with American undergraduate students in a chemistry lab at a large southeast US university. The study aims to answer to the following questions:

- 1) What functions does small talk achieve for an ITA and students in a chemistry lab?
- 2) How do the ITA and students convey their identities via small talk alongside instructional discourse?
- 3) How does small talk as a means establish and manage relationships between the ITA and students?

#### **3.1. The interactional context**

The research site in this study was an undergraduate organic chemistry lab. The main participant was the Chinese ITA Anna (pseudonym). Anna, 27 at the time of data collection in 2015, had been pursuing her doctoral studies in the US in the field of chemistry for four years. When she was admitted into her Ph.D. program, she was offered an assistantship by the

chemistry department. Even though she knew her assistantship appointment would involve some type of teaching, she did not know much about her teaching duties until she arrived in the US. Additionally, this was going to be Anna's first teaching experience as she had never taught before in China. At the time of this study, Anna had already worked as a lab teaching assistant for more than six semesters. In addition to lab teaching, she also taught a 30-minute lecture session.

Anna's primary role as a chemistry lab ITA is to advise and assist students during experiments. As students work in pairs or groups sharing a fume hood (see Figure 1), Anna frequently walks around the lab, checks on students' work, makes suggestions, gives instructions and explains experiment procedures. A regular lab session starts with Anna writing the instructions for the experiment on the board. Later, she passes out a quiz. Once the students turn in the quiz, they start the experiment.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **3.2. Data sources and analysis**

The data sources in this study consisted of extensive observations, audio recordings of chemistry lab sessions, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. The primary data was the observed interactions that were audio-recorded at different intervals over a period of an academic semester. More specifically, three full lab sessions of one hour and fifteen minutes each were observed and recorded. During the lab sessions, I assumed the role of a non-participant observer. Even though the chemistry lab was large and several concurrent sessions with other lab TAs were taking place, my observations focused only on Anna and her tutorial group of 12 students (4 females and 8 males). The observations focused on the characteristics of the physical lab setting, specifically what Anna did or said in between classroom procedures, how she utilized the

lab space, what students did or how they were interacting with one another. In other words, the observations provided me with details about the physical context of the interactions. After the first observation, due to the inaudible segments in recording, I had to ask Anna to carry the voice recorder with her as she was frequently walking around in the lab to help students. After each observation, I saved sound files in my password-secured personal laptop. Even though I observed and recorded several sessions, a total of 170 minutes of interactions were transcribed and analysed, as certain segments from some sessions were either inaudible due to the background noise or Anna and students were not interacting.

Even though I initially intended to video-record the lab sessions to gather paralinguistic data, such as facial expressions and body movements, this intention proved to be impractical in the chemistry lab. Unlike the traditional classroom lecture setting where students and teacher are physically more static, the chemistry lab was dynamic. ITAs and students were always on the move and it was not possible for me to video-record without intervening in the lab activities and jeopardizing the authenticity of the interactions. Therefore, taking detailed field notes as the secondary data source during observations enabled me to describe pertinent paralinguistic and contextual information that supplemented the spoken interactions in the transcriptions. My non-participant presence in the lab not only enabled me to understand the general atmosphere of the teaching and learning environment, but also focus on the interactions between Anna and her students.

Finally, the tertiary data source was the three thirty-minute semi-structured interviews I conducted with Anna during the same academic semester, followed by the three lab observed and recorded. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions based on the communication issues brought up by Anna. The issues Anna mentioned during the interviews did not always

refer to the interactions recorded for the study. Rather, they were general experiences she had while teaching in the US. Among the topics discussed during the interviews were actual communication incidents that took place in the lab, cross-cultural comparisons (specifically China and the US) about classroom communication in higher education settings, and Anna's own perceptions about communicating with American undergraduate students.

The data analysis began with the transcription of the interaction and interview data. Thanks to the iterative nature of the transcription process, I was able to review the data multiple times. I transcribed the lab interactions using the conventions in conversation analysis (CA) (Hepburn and Bolden 2013; Markee 2015) detailing any information pertaining to discourse features, such as pauses, overlaps, speech delivery (e.g., loudness, intonation) and my commentary regarding verbal and non-verbal actions or (un)intelligibility of the utterances. I chose CA as the data analysis method for the interaction data not only because it has been the most frequently used method in small talk studies (e.g., Hudak and Maynard, 2011, Benwell and McCreddie 2016), but it also allows for an analysis of talk-in-interaction in both everyday and institutional contexts, revealing participants' emic perspectives in conveying their realities in actual interaction (Antaki 2008; Marra 2013, Richards, Ross and Seedhouse 2012). The micro-analytic nature of CA enabled me to investigate how the participants in conversation create meaning via small talk within context by drawing on the linguistic choices they make and the effects of these choices on the functions of utterances.

Subsequent to the transcription of the interaction and interview data, I analysed the interactions to look for sequences of non-instructional talk between Anna and the students, drawing on my common-sense judgment of small talk as well as informed by the literature on the topic. More specifically, I searched for instances where the interactions seemed to be off-task

oriented, meaning that the conversation did not immediately relate to the class session or experiment procedures and exhibited features of social and personal talk departing from instructional talk. Sequences identified as instances of small talk included humour, banter, personal concern, and identity affiliations, which have been noted in previous research as the functions of small talk (Coupland 2000; Holmes 2000). For each session observed, I created a brief summary using the field notes in order to provide context and clarifications for small talk instances identified. In order to strengthen the interpretive validity of the analysis, the CA was subsequently triangulated by my field summaries and interview data with Anna.

#### **4. Findings**

The findings below are presented in two sections which summarise the main functions of small talk. The first section demonstrates how small talk functions as an identity marker by revealing interlocutors' positioning and identities in conversation. The second section focuses on how humorous small talk helps manage the interpersonal relationships between Anna and her students. In all extracts below *S* refers to students, and *A* refers to Anna. In some extracts *S* is followed by a number to indicate that there were multiple students in the interaction.

##### **4.1. Small talk as identity marker**

Extract 1 below is an example of how Anna's teacher identity is revealed by her pastoral care embedded in an instance of small talk:

###### **Extract 1**

- 1     A: Everything OK,
- 2     S: Yeah.
- 3     A: How about your finger,
- 4     S: Oh. (3.0) yeah (0.3) it's healing.
- 5     A: Oh. It already starts to connect or something↓.
- 6     S: Yeah, it's not swollen anymore. It's healing so::
- 7     A: Did you report that yesterday.
- 8     S: No I thought I had to see people first (1.0) cause I

9 saw them when I emailed you last night to confirm with  
 10 you and I didn't know if I had to see them again before  
 11 ((unintelligible) Yeah it's so [confusing]  
 12 A: ((laughs)) [Uhm (1.0)]  
 13 A: You can fill in the incident and then go get checked by  
 14 a physician. I will try to email you the safety  
 15 procedure of the TA  
 16 (1.0)  
 17 the MSDS.

In Extract 1, while walking around in the lab, Anna checks in with a male student in line 1 by asking him if everything is OK. While it initially appears to be a regular check on students' progress during the session, the topic of this interaction pertains to the student's well-being following a lab injury. Even though this interaction is not independent from the lab instructional setting as it pertains to safety in the lab, it exemplifies a personal concern that is not among the immediate instructional goals in the session. As can be seen in the extract, Anna's initiation of this non-instructional talk in line 3 was not expected by the student, indicated in line 4 by the change of state token *oh* followed by a brief pause prior to his response to Anna's question about his finger. Anna continues in line 7-17, guiding the student in following the necessary medical procedures. This instantaneous small talk exchange indicates Anna's relational sensitivity towards her students, foregrounding her teacher identity. When asked about instances of non-instructional talk, Anna acknowledges that this is specifically the case in the lab context:

'...when you stand and give a lecture to a hundred students, you're going to act professional like you don't want any talk. Also when you answer questions, you want to be professional. And other students are also listening and you don't really want to talk about something off the topic.'



Anna's perspective indicates that the situational context of instruction determines the nature of interaction. In her view, the lab context, possibly due to its small size, allows her to attend to more personal matters such as accidents or injuries as shown in Extract 1 via small talk, thereby projecting a more sensitive and attentive teacher identity, as opposed to a lecture setting where she believes that she would maintain a more 'professional' teacher identity with fewer opportunities for non-instructional talk.

Another identity that is made salient via small talk is one that pertains to Anna's profession. Extract 2 is from the beginning of a lab session when students are completing the session quiz prior to the experiment:

#### Extract 2

- 1 S: How was your congress, you::r conference.
- 2 A: Conference, It was great.
- 3 S: Did you present.
- 4 A: Yeah.
- 5 S: Did you win anything.
- 6 A: What?
- 7 S: Did you win anything.
- 8 A: No there was (0.5) like (1.0) thousands of people,
- 9 A: ((laughing))
- 10 S: So what, you're trying to say you're not good enough.
- 11 A: ((laughing)) There's no award. It's just a conference.

In lines 1-2, a male student initiates small talk with Anna, asking about her conference trip. The student's question in line 5, *Did you win anything* is followed by a classic repair initiation with an open-class repair initiator *what* in line 6. This repair initiation is treated by the student as a problem of hearing or comprehension therefore he repeats his question in line 7. However, Anna's reply in lines 8-9 with laughter indicates that she found this question funny, as she stated that it was a big conference with thousands of attendees. Not understanding what Anna meant, the student in line 10 asks whether she implied that she was not good enough to receive an award, somewhat projecting the identity of a successful professional on Anna. Anna's

laughter continues in line 11, with the clarification that awards are not given to presenters at academic conferences. This small talk exchange demonstrates that Anna and the student clearly have different ideas about academic conferences and what they entail and positions Anna as a member of an academic discourse community and foregrounds her professional identity. However, the student's unfamiliarity with academic conventions reveals his lack of background knowledge about the discourse structure of academic conferences. In other words, we see that while Anna and the student both share a student identity in general, Anna's professional identity is made salient, which contrasts with the undergraduate identity of the student.

Anna's professional identity is further foregrounded in Extract 3 in which Anna and two male students engage in small talk about a social event called 'First Friday:'

#### Extract 3

1 S1: Okay (1.0) so now we add the water and.=  
 2 S2: =You gone to First Friday,=  
 3 A: To what? Which [Friday,  
 4 S3: [((laughs)) to what↓  
 5 S2: First Friday↑↑ Flamingo.  
 6 A: What is First Friday.  
 7 S2: You don't know what First Friday is↑ ((surprise))  
 8 A: No.  
 9 S2: How long have you been in the Flamingo area,  
 10 A: Four years.  
 11 S2: And you don't know, UH! This is embarrassing. This is  
 12 (1.0) You've got shame upon yourself in this  
 13 institution=  
 14 A: =((laughs))I'm working every weekend.=  
 15 S2: First Friday of every month (1.0) downtown Flamingo  
 16 closes down like five blocks and all the bars are  
 17 really cheap.  
 18 A: Oh really,  
 19 S2: Oh, yeah (1.0) Yeah, really.

Upon being asked by S2 in line 2 if she went to First Friday, Anna replies in line 3 by a repair initiation, indicating that she does not know what First Friday is. In line 4, Anna's

unfamiliarity with this event is ridiculed by S3. In addition, in lines 7-13, S2 playfully questions Anna's lack of knowledge about this event. Her question about what this event is in line 6 surprises S2 who later asks in line 9 how long Anna has lived in the local area. This question implies that Anna might not know about this event given that she is not a long-term resident in the area. However, her response in line 10 (that she has lived there for four years) is further ridiculed by S2 and her lack of knowledge leads to a playful mockery. Anna defends herself in line 14 by a latch on S2's turn in lines 12-13 by saying that she works every weekend. This simple utterance immediately following students' mockery reveals Anna's professional identity, specifically that she has to work long hours, even on Friday evenings. Anna's foregrounding of her work/social life balance in this small talk exchange reveals her professional identity, particularly highlighting the mismatches between herself and her students with respect to orientations, priorities and responsibilities.

Identity-work in small talk also manifests itself directly via participants' self-ascribed identities. Extract 4 demonstrates how Anna and a male student of Chinese origin are negotiating their English speaker status:

#### Extract 4

- 1 S: How do you (0.5) like (0.5) it's like (0.5) you're
- 2 saying something (0.5) but like there's a little notice.
- 3 This asterix.
- 4 A: ((laughing))You're asking me, I'm not a native speaker.
- 5 S: I'M NOT A NATIVE SPEAKER.
- 6 A: You are.
- 7 S: NO, I'M NOT.
- 8 A: You grew up here. Yes, you are.
- 9 S: No, I grew up there.
- 10 A: You can take a paper towel.

This negotiation is initiated in line 1 by the student who asks Anna what appears to be a linguistic question about notations or symbols. Surprised, Anna responds with laughter in line 4

by positioning herself as a non-native speaker of English who would not have the authority to answer the question. Additionally, Anna's formulation of the "you vs me" contrast suggests that she considers the student a native speaker. In response to this positioning, the student in line 5 also firmly positions himself as not being a native speaker of English indicated by the loud volume in response, with which Anna disagrees in line 6 by stating that he is. The negotiation continues by Anna providing grounds for her claim by saying that the student actually grew up here (referring to the US, the immediate physical context of the talk), thus assigning the student the identity or status of a native English speaker. However, the student adds in line 8 that he grew up in China. This brief small talk exchange exemplifies the fluid nature of identities, particularly the mismatches between ascribed and self-ascribed identities, in this case, the identity of a native/non-native English speaker.

Anna's positioning herself as a non-native English speaker is further elaborated on in one of the interviews and how it affects her interactions with students. She states that certain aspects of her use of English can be subjected to friendly mockery during such small talk episodes:

'I remember last year I said 'cracked ice.' Even though I said cracked ice, the professional English, it's cracked ice - that means the freshly cracked ice. But, I think in your language, cracked also means get high? Every time I said cracked, two boys going to laugh. I was like, 'What's your problem?' And by the end of the semester before they leave, they told me.'

Anna reports that students' mockery or corrections with respect to her English does not really bother her. On the contrary, she believes that she learns a lot about English from such interactions. As shown by the extracts in this section, it appears that small talk creates a space

for interlocutors to project and/or negotiate multiple identities. The emergence and negotiation of some identities via small talk helps individuals position themselves in different identity groups.

#### 4.2. Small talk as a resource for humour

Humour as a solidarity marker could also be embedded in small talk and contribute to establishing rapport. In what follows I will demonstrate how humour is embedded in small talk interactions.

In line 4 of Extract 5 below, Anna switches to brief small talk by recognizing the student's haircut:

##### Extract 5

- 1 S: I need to weigh it but I can't.=  
2 A: =Solid you can take it out. Solid is (0.3) just a salt  
3 (0.1)right, The only thing they are=  
4 =Oh, You cut your hair.  
5 (1.0)  
6 A: Finally.  
7 S: Did you take that long to notice,  
8 A: ((laughs))Normally it's the liquid and the volatile  
9 solids that we are worried about, right.

Anna's recognition of the student's haircut shows an attempt at teasing, as indicated by the exclamatory adverbial at the end of line 4. The adverbial *finally* implies that Anna thought the student had long needed a haircut and possibly he now looked more decent than previously. Following Anna's comment is the student's playful response in lines 5 that it was Anna who failed to notice the student's haircut, which indicates his interpretation and participation in teasing. This humorous exchange serves as an example of evaluation or stance which forms the basis of humour in that it is often expressed implicitly and can have supportive or unsupportive functions (Partington 2006; Wang 2014). As can be seen in this example, Anna's recognition of the student's haircut initially appears to be a positive evaluation which is followed by a challenge

from her in the form of a tease with the use of the sarcastic adverb *finally*. The student's response in the form of a tease-on-tease further indicates a shared awareness in implied meaning involving humour.

Teasing as a form of relational humour suggests that there is an established rapport between Anna and her students since attempts at small talk of this kind would be improbable in contexts in which participants maintain power and distance in their relationships. As suggested by Norrick (2003), teasing facilitates a relationship between interlocutors that frees them from formalities, thus enhancing the rapport between them. In addition, coming from a culture where interacting with teachers in jocular ways is not possible, Anna reports she embraces the open and relaxed teaching and learning environment in the US where such humorous small talk can occur:

'I like this kind of communication - allow the student to ask questions and they're not afraid to ask you questions. For us in China, we would double think the question before we ask, like, "We don't want to look stupid." But here they just speak out whatever they want and it's good for them to learn... They can still make jokes and we can still be friendly to each other as long as we respect each other.'

Extract 6 shows how teasing can be aggressive and poses a challenge for Anna following her inquiry about an unpleasant chemical smell:

#### Extract 6

- 1 A: It stinks here. What's this smell,
- 2 S: We::ll.
- 3 A: ((laughs)) I know it's not you. ((unintelligible))
- 4 S: ((laughs)) You're so mean.
- 5 A: YOU are so mean. I'm talking [about the ]
- 6 S: [I'm so mean]
- 7 A: I'm talking about the chemical. I'm not talking about

8           you.  
9     S: You can't come in here insulting my odor.  
10    A: I'M TALKING ABOUT THE CHEMICAL, GUYS, ((chuckles))  
11    S: Okay, I've got the odor. ((unintelligible))

Anna's inquiry about the smell in line 1 is responded to by a male student with the discourse marker *well* in line 2 which is signalling an attempt at teasing and suggests that is being blamed for the smell. Understanding the implicature, Anna laughs in line 3 and tries to save the student's negative face by saying *I know it's not you*. With this turn Anna might also be doing a pre-emptive self-defence, attempting to clarify a potential misunderstanding: she did not imply that the student might be causing the smell. The relevance of this pre-emptive defence is later confirmed by the student who positions himself as being insulted by Anna and blames her for being mean in line 4.

Anna defends herself with a return accusation (line 5), which is actually picked up by the student in line 6. ("I'm so mean"). Then Anna provides an account for her original turn in line 1 (her noticing followed by the inquisitive question "What's this smell") by explaining that she was indeed talking about the chemical, attempting to end the tease (lines 7-8). In her turn, she responds with a tease on a tease, defending herself by providing exaggerated denial or surprise. However, the student in line 9 further accuses Anna of insulting him for his body odour, which makes Anna raise her voice in line 10 and repeat she was talking about the chemical with a chuckle, indicating that she still tries to maintain the humorous nature of this exchange but with a firm tone. Finally, in line 11, this exchange ends despite the fact that the student continues the humour. This laughter in conversation is an example of the unsupportive function of humour (Partington, 2006) in that it is used by the student to disagree or challenge what Anna said. This extract suggests that the relationship dynamics between Anna and the students are based on

solidarity and indicates a lack of social distance between her and the students. In fact, in one of the interviews, Anna explains that she doesn't mind such humorous interactions:

‘...This is your own-- communication between us. They would even say mean things to me but I know they don't mean it. It's like a joke... Because for the students who have more open characteristics, you can be open too. You can make fun of them because they make fun of you all the time as well.’

Embracing humour as part of classroom communication, Anna, in Extract 7 below, uses humour as a face-saving strategy while discussing with a male student about why he missed a class quiz:

#### Extract 7

1 S1: I was at an interview for SG ((Student Government))  
2 so.  
3 A: Where is the interview,  
4 (1.0)  
5 appointment.  
6 S1: Do you want me to show that to you,  
7 A: Yeah.  
8 S1: I can get you a note through email.  
9 A: Yeah. And also I need to see that you actually went to  
10 the interview.  
11 S1: Of course. I'll get it [from,  
12 A: [What time is the interview  
13 S1: It was during our lunch hour.  
14 S2: ((laughs))  
15 A: Yeah, you're such a liar.  
16 S1: I'm serious.  
17 A: ((laughing)) Liar, liar, pants on fire.  
18 S1: I will get you a note from SG saying I was.=  
19 A: =Because you work for SG, you can easily get [someone.  
20 S: [I don't  
21 work for SG.  
22 S2: What's the temperature supposed to be,



As can be seen in lines 1-2, the student gives reasons for missing the quiz which then leads Anna to further inquire about his absence in lines 3-8. Learning that the student's interview took place at lunch time (line 13), coupled with another student's laughter (line 14) upon S1's response, leads Anna to conclude that the student was lying. In line 15 Anna first takes a very serious tone and playfully accuses the student of lying. The student defends himself in line 16 by claiming that he is serious, which is followed by Anna's use of the idiomatic expression *Liar, liar, pants on fire* in line 17. Despite being serious, Anna's use of this expression accompanied by laughter somewhat mitigates the effect of the accusation. The exchange continues in lines 18-21 with further defence from the student and Anna's rejection of it.

The above-described extracts illustrate how the embedded humour in small talk creates a relaxed teaching and learning environment in which matters can be discussed in a common ground. The existence of humour in small talk also suggests a closure of the social distance gap between Anna and her students. In addition, teasing appears to be at the centre of humorous small talk, which has been purported to reinforce solidarity and express rapport among interlocutors (Wulff, Swales and Keller 2009).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper presented a case study of a female Chinese ITA in an undergraduate chemistry lab and her engagement in small talk with American students. In response to the first research question (RQ1), the findings show that, small talk in this lab context is very personal and expandable, performing different functions such as identity marking and negotiation of humorous meaning, particularly what is interpreted and implied by interlocutors during talk-in-interaction and how solidarity and rapport were maintained among the students and the ITA. With respect to the roles and identities (RQ2), the topic of small talk can make interlocutors'

identities salient and inferable, enabling them to position themselves within particular discourse systems, such as being undergraduate/graduate student communities and the particular assumptions, activities and responsibilities associated with roles within these communities, belonging or not belonging to certain linguistic groups (e.g. being a native or non-native speaker). In this vein, participants also expressed desirable or avowed identities through small talk (Tracy and Naughton 2000). As regards to RQ3, the interactions between Anna and students appeared to be mutually congenial, demonstrating affiliations and friendly exchanges, including joking and teasing during pauses in lab procedures, indicating that small talk seems to serve and maintain a solidarity-based relationship between Anna and her students. As Davies (2003) contends, joking indicates conversation involvement and can be considered as a positive politeness strategy that helps establish solidarity and rapport. Additionally, the inclusion of humour in non-instructional small talk aligns with Anna's preference for an open and interactive learning environment.

While seeming to diverge from instructional talk, the rapid and short-lasting transitions to small talk do not appear to negatively affect the instructional cohesiveness in the lab, unlike what Benwell and McCreddie (2016) found to be possibly disruptive in nurse-patient interactions and institutional agendas. Through her engagement in small talk supported by interview data, we learn about Anna's professional identity, particularly how she positions herself and acts as a teaching assistant, how she views teaching in different contexts, and what kinds of relationships she is open to building with her students. Anna's use of small talk with students in the lab also evidences her academic socialization in the US academic context. Her adjustment to this context is informed by the comparisons to conventionalized relational patterns in the Chinese education system, specifically the lack of interactivity and open relationships between instructors and

students in the classroom. As shown in previous research focusing on the role of small talk in workplace socialization (Mak and Chui 2012), the present study demonstrates that small talk can also be a significant contributor to the academic socialisation of ITAs.

Unlike previous research investigating ITAs' communicative competence in English as an independent linguistic system mainly defined at micro levels, the present study highlights the importance of natural context of communication in building and maintaining relationships, rapport and social cohesion. As reported in previous research (e.g., Bresnahan and Cai 2000), openness to communicate, welcomed cross-cultural learning, and a sense of humour are indicators of successful ITAs and Anna appears to exhibit all of them. Additionally, while the previous research on ITAs in science lab contexts mainly focused on instructional discourse and question and answer exchanges (Gourlay 2008; Myers 1994; Tanner 1991), the present study is the first to shed light on the relational and non-instructional aspects of science labs, particularly in the domain of ITAs as L2 English users. More specifically, in addition to the transactional question-answer exchanges, the science labs also include relational patterns of discourse, such as humorous and social talk. Additionally, as much as content delivery, balanced leadership, solidarity and rapport are aspects of teaching that bear significance in instructional discourse (Davis 1991; Twale et al. 1997) and small talk can be a means to achieve these non-instructional but relational goals in classroom interaction.

This case study is not one without limitations. Given that individual differences in communication styles and cultural backgrounds have the potential to influence the way people achieve transactional and instrumental goals in communication, it is to be expected that interactions in different academic disciplines and environments by different ITAs will vary. This study shows the means by which social cohesiveness is achieved via small talk in an

instructional environment. While this study does not suggest that small talk should be enforced in any instructional setting – given that not all ITAs have the same level of openness and comfort to engage in such interactions in a new educational setting – it can be a means to foster the relationships between ITAs and students and stimulate interaction.

Since the study focused on how Anna engaged in small talk with students and her views about non-instructional talk in the lab setting, the student perspectives were not central to the scope of this study. While students' perspective could potentially contribute to our understanding of communication in science labs led by ITAs, the analysis of interactions indicates that students actively participate in small talk by demonstrating conversational cooperativeness. This cooperativeness may potentially facilitate instructional goals of students. As Pullin (2010) suggested, the achievement of transactional goals is dependent on the establishment of interpersonal relationships, meaning that social talk can encourage more active involvement in carrying out particular class activities. As observed in business contexts, small talk may facilitate instrumental goals by constituting relationships between interlocutors – as Holmes (2000) puts it, 'oiling the social wheels' (p. 57). Mutual engagement in small talk provides evidence for small talk creating an opportunity for negotiation of identities, power/distance relationships, discussion of non-instructional matters, which characterizes the main features of the American college classroom (Axelson and Madden 1994; Shaw and Bailey 1990; Unger-Gallagher 1991). More specifically, even though she comes from a teacher-centred educational culture in China, Anna's embracement of the student-centred learning environment in the US seemed to have helped her close the power/distance gap between herself and students, thereby allowing her to be more social with her students. One interesting finding with respect to students' participation in small talk is that its occurrence was mainly observed between Anna and male students. This could be

attributed to the fact that small talk is generally male-dominated in western cultures (Holmes 2000). Arguably, whether or not the gender of the ITA or other demographic variables such as ethnicity, nationality, cultural background or individual differences (e.g., personality, willingness to communicate) plays a role in engaging in relational talk with students remains a question for further research.

This study shows that small talk is indeed beyond simple chit-chat. It bears relational significance adding personal engagement and affect to what would otherwise be mechanical instructional talk. Investigating small talk using conversation analysis in an instructional context, particularly an advanced L2 English user's engagement in it with native English speaker students, this study highlights the importance of interactional competence in L2 use in real-life contexts, particularly in the realm of managing interpersonal relationships. More specifically, rather than viewing it as an abstract or perceived notion, the present study demonstrates the observable tenets of interactional competence, highlighting such practices as turn-taking, sequencing, overall structuring and repair as they occur in instances of small talk. In addition, managing small talk for relational purposes resonates with the pragmatic or sociolinguistic dimension of Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence model. In fact, the recent reconceptualisations of interactional competence in the conversational analysis literature highlight pragmatic competence. For example, according to Youn (2015), interactional competence is 'pragmatic competence in interaction' encompassing the generic organization such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs and preference organization. Similarly, Ikeda (2017) characterizes interactional competence as 'discourse-oriented L2 pragmatic ability' with active involvement in conversations and greater ability to engage in topic development.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest some implications for L2 instruction and use in real-life contexts, particularly in the domain of ITA training, curricula and professional development. While developing the small talk skills of ITAs may not be crucial or a priority in ITA training programs or workshops, opportunities to discuss the possible benefits of it in establishing rapport through humour, negotiating roles and identities, and aiding transition to a new culture could help ITAs better understand the US educational culture. Signalling conversational enthusiasm and involvement, small talk can also be a means to demonstrate openness, confidence and approachability in the classroom as well as concern and interest in students. With respect to rapport, small talk can be an excellent interactional tool to establish and maintain it. In this vein, ITAs can be provided with linguistic strategies and particular genres and topics of small talk appropriate in instructional settings. Small talk can also be an excellent means for ITAs as well as students to understand cross-cultural differences in teacher-student relationships and become more aware of the potential conflicts or miscommunications that might arise from the cultural mismatches, thereby raising their awareness in intercultural communication and preparing them for future academic or business communication encounters.

### **Appendix: Transcription Conventions**

- [...] simultaneous, overlapping talk
- = latched utterance
- (0.3) a pause of 0.3 second
- (1.0) pause of one second
- short untimed pause
- (,) slightly rising intonation

- ¡ pitch rise stronger than a comma
- (.) falling intonation
- ↑ marked rising shift in intonation
- ↓ marked falling shift in intonation
- :: lengthening of the preceding sound (each colon represents a lengthening of one beat)
- XYZ large capitals indicate loud volume
- xyz small capitals indicate intermediate volume
- ((...)) verbal description of actions
- ((unintelligible)) speech unintelligible to the transcriber
- (( )) researcher/transcriber comments

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